

✓  
A PETITION



TO ESTABLISH A DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND  
THE APPOINTMENT OF A SECRETARY  
OF PUBLIC HEALTH.

*To the Honorable, the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House  
of Representatives of the Congress of the United States of America:*

The American Medical Association, at its annual meeting held in Washington in May last, unanimously adopted the following resolution:

*Resolved*, That the President of the Association, W. T. Briggs, M.D., of Nashville, Tenn., appoint a committee of *thirty* to memorialize the next Congress to create a cabinet officer to be known as Medical Secretary of Public Health.

NAMES OF COMMITTEE.

C. G. Comegys, Chairman, Ohio; N. S. Davis, Illinois; T. G. Richardson, Louisiana; J. C. Culbertson, Ohio; J. F. Hibberd, Indiana; W. B. Atkinson, Pennsylvania; Charles A. Lindsley, Connecticut; C. A. Hughes, Missouri; W. T. Briggs, Tennessee; H. D. Didama, New York; Thos. B. Evans, Maryland; Alex. J. Stone, Minnesota; J. P. Logan, Georgia; W. Ayer, California; Chas. Denison, Colorado; W. I. Schenck, Kansas; P. O. Hooper, Arkansas; H. J. Swearingen, Texas; Wirt Johnston, Mississippi; Thos. F. Wood, North Carolina; J. N. McCormack, Kentucky; J. I. Reeve, Wisconsin; H. O. Walker, Michigan; Landon B. Edwards, Virginia; Albert N. Blodgett, Massachusetts; A. D. Beven, Oregon; E. D. Smith, Washington; J. B. Atchinson, Montana; C. H. Mastin, Alabama; R. A. Kinlock, South Carolina.

The undersigned, constituting a majority of the committee thus appointed, have the honor of petitioning Congress to grant this unanimous request, and thereto beg your consideration of some of the views expressed by the Association during the proceedings held on this important proposition.

First, we beg to say that the American Medical Association is constituted of men of distinction in their profession in every part of the Union.

For more than forty years its sessions have been held in all the chief cities of the States from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast, and large numbers of the most eminent teachers and practitioners have participated in its councils. These annual assemblies have promoted scientific research, the formation of State Boards of Health, higher education and the publication of treatises on practical and preventive medicine which form a continuous line of medical progress in the last half of the present century.

The marked progress in medicine and surgery in late years, for the promotion of which European governments have contributed a sufficient support by which men of capacity have been able to give their entire time to hygienic, experimental and clinical research, has not been fostered in our country, where the medical profession has been left, for the most part, to take care of itself, without subvention of the State.

It must be acknowledged that the Government, through the operation of the Surgeon-Generals of the Army, Navy, and Marine Department, and by the action of the Secretary of State, has authorized liberal expenditures for the establishment of the National Medical Library and Museum, the issue of the incomparable Index Catalogue of the Library and publications of Army records of the late war, and for original researches at home and abroad on the origin and nature of the fearful epidemics brought to our shores by immigrant and other ships; the establishment of scientific posts by the Surgeon-General of the Marine Hospital service at Dry Tortugas for the special and continuous investigation of the causes of yellow fever, the Bacteriological Laboratory attached to the United States Marine-Hospital at New York, and to the Surgeon-General of the Navy for the Naval Museum of Hygiene, in whose laboratories chemical analyses of water and food, as well as bacteriological researches, are constantly going on. The conventions of the quarantine service in the last few years have secured great progress towards a uniformity in quarantine laws; and an extensive correspondence has been established by the Surgeon-General of the Marine-Hospital with our consuls, so that the quarantine service is constantly advised of the prevalence of epidemics in countries with which we are closely connected in a commercial way.

The work thus carried on is certainly of the highest importance, and avails in the protection of our ports and coast cities from infectious diseases of foreign origin; but the medical profession believes that the Government can, in a far wider way, promote the public good by creating a Department of Public Health, the head of which shall be a member of the cabinet of the President; and it seems to the Association that this is a propitious time for the inauguration of measures that will place the medical profession



in its true relation to public affairs. There is no other profession that excels ours in positive efficiency to sustain public order, comfort and virtue. We possess vast capacity for the direction of society and promotion of human happiness.

At this time the profession is manifesting, in a higher spirit than at any previous period, the power to suppress contagious and infectious diseases. This work was begun by Jenner a century ago, and the scourge of small-pox has been stamped out wherever vaccination is practiced.

There are infectious and epidemic diseases that move round the world in nearly fixed periods, which we need not now particularize; they are frequently the products of squalor and wretchedness of peoples, and are spread far and wide about the lines of commerce. These invisible foes infect the air, the water, and the very food we eat. From the grosser foes of human health, cold, heat and tempest, people have power to defend themselves; but as regards these invisible agents of suffering and death, they are largely helpless, for want of higher knowledge. In their despair they turn to medical science for help, unwilling to trust in the brute law of the survival of the fittest.

What laws are necessary for the full activity of our beneficent profession? We reply: those that relate to the social state of the people for the prevention of disease. They comprehend an amplitude and purity of water supply; proper dwellings for the working classes without overcrowding or deficiency of light and air; adulterated, or diseased food; complete drainage; disinfection of excrement; the preservation of rivers and smaller streams from pollution; the regulation of the hours of labor; the protection of childhood from the imposition of toil and their proper education in commodious, healthy buildings; cleanliness of streets and planting of shade trees in cities for protection from intense solar heat and the decomposing power by their leaves of deleterious gases and miasms; the establishment of public baths; the operations of quarantine to prevent invasion of pestilence and landing of immigrants with diseases dangerous to others; the isolation of persons attacked with infectious diseases and the disinfection of localities; the construction and management of general and special hospitals; the care of the sick poor in their homes; the prevention of consanguineous marriages and of those who have destructive types of constitution; the warning of society of the evil consequences of abuses of the brain the material basis of consciousness, whereby a free will is impaired and the sufferers become irresponsible and often mentally ruined; the registration of vital statistics; and lastly, the repression of those two giant evils of civilization, intemperance and prostitution.

We affirm that all the measures for public relief on these important subjects should be under the guidance of medical men.

It is not the mere knowledge of the human frame as a diseased entity, or a mechanism that should give us highest consideration in the State, but rather our capacity to prevent sickness by securing the proper administration of the laws of health. The medical profession holds itself ready, as it has always, not only to diminish the destruction of life now going on, but ultimately to destroy the contagions that cause it. It is now becoming generally known that infectious diseases and toxic elements are disseminated in food. An infectious disease in the family of a dairy-man, or amongst his cattle, may be as widely diffused as his distribution of milk. The pollution of streams of water and wells in towns, villages and homes of farmers, we know definitely, subject many families to tedious and fatal diseases which a wise sanitation will overcome, if we possessed the power so to enforce it. It is now so absolutely demonstrated that by the rigid application of hygienic measures the ravages of pestilence may be arrested that medical scientists speak of this destruction as a "self-imposed curse of dying in the prime of life."

Your petitioners are aware that Congress cannot enact laws on subjects which appertain to State and municipal legislation; but Congress can establish a Department of Public Health, which would assist, immensely, the systemization of facts of great importance to physicians and the people.

The latest addition to the cabinet of the President is that of Secretary of Agriculture, and already a great impulse has been inaugurated by the practical farmer who is at its head.

The question may arise with some person, whether such a department would subserve the interests of any particular school? We respectfully reply that amid all the apparent disparity in medical practice there is one true, severe unity, and to attain this all true physicians are continually striving. There is no disputation in medical science about anatomy, physiology, pathology, chemistry, physics, or preventive medicine; the difference amongst doctors lies in therapeutics or the treatment of disease, and as in the past, so for all the future, practitioners will use a variety of remedies and in varying quantities, and there will be different modes of management of sick, or injured people. With the advance in the way of education the differences in treatment will gradually become more unified.

The organism which is called medicine, like every other product of man's constructive genius, is striving to attain perfection, and to accomplish this it must be sustained in all its scientific undertakings by the coöperation of national and state legislation and the hearty coöperation of



the people for whose health and happiness all its efforts are put forth to prevent disease. It is certainly a remarkable spectacle to observe its constant effort to save the people from disease, when success will limit to the smallest dimension the office of physician. But this grows out of the nature of their studies, the tendency of which gives the highest motive for unselfish service to suffering humanity. The physician is bound to render this service to rich and poor alike. The amount of gratuitous service, especially in great cities, constitutes one third of their practice. The most distinguished and experienced of the profession form the staffs of all of our hospitals, without any remuneration. It may be said that they receive their pay by reason of the distinction of their position; but they must have had distinction before their appointments. In war the surgeon must follow through the thickest of the fire, not to deal out destruction, but to staunch the wounds of friend and foe alike. If there was cruelty to prisoners on either side in our civil war, it was not perpetrated by the surgeons of opposing armies; and when the strife ceased they were the first to extend the fraternal hand across the field of conflict.

The collection of statistics of births, deaths and marriages, and their tabulation, we beg to say, should earnestly engage the attention of Congress. The different states and cities of the Union have for a long time been aiming to accomplish this, but we have no statistics that are national in character. The limits of the memorial do not allow us to show at large how, by such facts, many of the most important problems in our social state may be solved.

Recently an eminent medical writer of England, Sir James Crichton-Browne, M.D., LL.D., has shown that since 1859, while the decline in the death-rate at all ages has been 17.6 per cent. under fifty-five years, it has only been 2.7 per cent. at all ages above fifty-five. The principle decline has taken place under thirty-five. After forty-five the decline, since 1859, has been insignificant, but from sixty-five to seventy-five the death rate in the same time has increased. He adds that it is not satisfactory to learn that while there has been an enormous increase in babies and young men and women, the loss is alarming amongst those eminent in experience and judgment. The causes of the vital failure in the mature element in society was not difficult to find by his statistical studies. In three or four groups of diseases most wonderful increase in mortality has taken place. Thus, in England and Wales, cancer, in five years, 1859 to 1863, carried off 35,654 persons; while in five years, 1884 to 1889, 81,620 died of that fell disease, an increase of 130 per cent. Seven-eighths of these victims were over thirty-five years of age. Of nervous diseases in the first quinquennium,

196,906 died; in the second, 260,558, an increase of 32 per cent. Of kidney diseases the loss in the first period was 23,176; in the second, 61,371, an increase of 164 per cent. Of heart diseases in the first period, 92,181 died; in the second period, 224,102 perished, an increase of 143 per cent.

These diseases, he says, are of the degenerative character, and may largely be traced to vital abuses or overstrain, or increasing luxuriousness in our advancing civilization, thus establishing, broadly, a premature senility; moreover, the increase in insanity from the mildest to the gravest forms is causing solicitude everywhere. It cannot be questioned that this fearful increase in bodily and mental decay should be well understood and placed before the people; but it is painful to say, that no such generalizations are attainable in our Government offices for lack of statistical records.

There is another aspect of this premature decay of grave interest, and it concerns a burning question of our day. Sir James shows that owing to the strain and drive in many manufactories where handicraft—piece-work—prevails, the neuro-muscular system of the shoulder, arm and hand, which on the average attains maturity at thirty years and should continue thirty years longer, begins to fail at forty-five; and while at thirty a man can earn 45 shillings a week, at forty-five, strive as he may, he cannot earn over 38 shillings, and at fifty-five his earnings fall to 24 shillings a week, owing to premature decay from overwork. In Sheffield he found that makers of penknives aged thirty years, who, in order to make a comfortable living, must strike 28,000 blows a day with a hammer, at forty years find their celerity and skill so at fault from this continuous overstrain that their wages decline to nearly one-half.

Physicians are held to be the guardians of the organs that concur for the maintenance of the body; but it is not so generally understood that the great brain is just as much an organ of their conservative regard: it is not so well understood that a healthy brain is necessary to free will. This is a momentous question, and it concerns the happiness and prosperity of the social and political state. The injury which pupils suffer, more especially in the primary and intermediate grades of public schools, by the bad hygiene in overcrowded, ill-lighted and ill-ventilated rooms, has become so serious as to bring about state interference. In Germany medical supervision has been authorized in the construction of school buildings so as to overcome these evils. The sense of sight has been particularly impaired; but the organic life of the brain has been lowered by the same evils, and the intellectual processes affected. In the technological schools of France the use of tobacco by students is forbidden because it had been ascertained that this intoxicant deteriorated the higher mental faculties. Researches have been



diligently made by medical specialists in our country, and gross evils in the hygienic conditions of school-houses ascertained, and the injury of general and special organs pointed out, and the American Medical Association has steadily promoted these investigations; but these reports have not seriously awakened the attention of city or state governments.

Another very serious evil exists in almost the whole range of our common and higher schools, that is, the so-called *memoriter* method of instruction, which seems to be a necessity so long as the rank in scholarship continues to be determined by *per cent.* of a pupil's correct answers in examinations. This abuse of memory fatigues the brain and lowers the powers of the mind. Physicians protest against this method of teaching because it distresses the brain, impairs free thought and the constructive power of the intellect. Lessons are memorized and not acquired by efforts of the understanding, hence they are not well retained, and furnish a poor basis for wide intellectual culture. Not only this, but the emotional conditions so often encountered, and the startling phenomena of hypnotism, are in many cases superinduced by this cramming method.

There are no fortuitous conditions that concur for the production of the best moral and political circumstances of society; the whole is purposive intelligence existing in the individual and combined for the exigencies of the family and the State.

Wherever the highest development of physical health exists, there will be found the surest basis for development of the mental faculties. These are not abstract questions of philosophy, but are the most practical questions of our day.

A Secretary of Public Health would represent the medical consciousness of the Nation, and become one to whom we could look for the exploitation of measures that will direct continuous scientific and collective investigation in regard to endemic, contagious and other diseases; the enlightenment of the people in sanitary ways of living; the dissemination of information respecting the most favorable places of residence for those afflicted with such chronic diseases as asthma, rheumatism, neuralgia and consumption; the examination of food and drinks; medicinal springs; the collection and tabulation of vital statistics at large and in various localities, such as the congested areas of our great cities and amongst various races. He would be able to coöperate with State Boards of Health, the Signal Service, the medical departments of the Army, Navy and Marine Service, unify and utilize their work, and thus make the Department of Public Health the repository of the most important facts that concern the comfort of the people; and his duties will grow broader and stronger in adaptability to public

needs. Moreover, the creation of this department will be a declaration by Congress that the promotion of the health of the people is a supreme law, and that in the future progress of civilization medicine shall have its true rank with the other offices of the State.

All of which is respectfully submitted.

|                          |                    |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| C. G. COMEGYS, Chairman. | W. I. SCHENCK.     |
| N. S. DAVIS.             | P. O. HOOPER.      |
| T. G. RICHARDSON,        | H. J. SWEARINGEN.  |
| J. F. HIBBERD.           | THOS. F. WOOD.     |
| W. B. ATKINSON.          | J. N. McCORMACK.   |
| CHARLES LINDSLEY.        | J. J. REED.        |
| C. A. HUGHES.            | J. C. CULBERTSON.  |
| W. T. BRIGGS.            | H. O. WALKER.      |
| CHARLES DENISON.         | LANDON B. EDWARDS. |
| THOS. P. EVANS.          | A. N. BLODGETT.    |
| ALEX. I. STONE.          |                    |

---

NOTE.—I have not appended the names of a number of the Committee because I have not heard from them. I hope to get them all, so that they can be added in the committee-room of Congress. Physicians who favor this movement will please send to me, *without delay*, by postal or letter, *their names and addresses*, saying: "I favor the movement to create a Department of Public Health and a Medical Secretary of Public Health." I will forward their names to Washington.

If all of the profession who favor it will write to their Senators and Representatives it will greatly aid the movement. A distinguished Senator writes to me, saying: "I appreciate the great importance of the subject, and will give any aid I can to promote its adoption."

Respectfully,

C. G. COMEGYS,  
266 Elm St., Cincinnati, O.